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## ‘BEER USED TO BELONG TO OLDER MEN’: DRINK AND AUTHORITY AMONG THE NYAKYUSA OF TANZANIA

*Justin Willis*

In her last major work on social change among the Nyakyusa of south-western Tanzania, Monica Wilson returned to an argument about the changing role of beer drinking which had featured in her earlier writings (1963: 176, 1977: 92–3, 131). She suggested that the selling of locally made grain beer for cash, and its consumption in commercial clubs, had played a major role in altering relationships between young and old, and men and women. Generational separation had broken down: young men had lost respect for elder men and women had acquired a new economic autonomy founded on the cash income they earned from selling beer. Beer thus lay at the heart of a pattern of social change (1977: 186).

This article examines changes in authority and the drinking of beer in Nyakyusa society from the 1890s—when written records become available—to the end of the twentieth century. It argues that patterns of deference and authority have suffered less dislocation than Wilson suggested and that—while locally made grain beer has been physically transformed, has disappeared from certain public rituals of well-being and has come increasingly into the cash market—its commoditisation has not necessarily empowered women, nor has it eliminated the role of beer in patterns of behaviour and discourse which sustain elder men’s claims to authority.

### DRINKING POWER

In 1970 MacAndrew and Edgerton’s *Drunken Comportment* challenged a generation of literature which had focused on alcohol’s chemically defined role as a disinhibitor (see, for example, Emerson, 1934: v–vi). MacAndrew and Edgerton suggested that drunken behaviour in any culture is actually learned, rather than being the inevitable consequence of chemical processes (1970: 87–8), and went on to argue that in many societies drinking is associated with ‘time out’, that is, drink defines moments in which the bounds of normally accepted behaviour may be challenged (*ibid.*: 89–90, 166–8). Their argument, which will seem familiar enough to any student of Gluckman, was that such moments of inversion serve ultimately to reinforce norms of behaviour (*ibid.*: 169; see also Dennis, 1979: 60; Adler, 1991: 387; Akyeampong, 1996: 8).

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JUSTIN WILLIS is a Senior Research and Development Associate in the Department of History at the University of Durham. He has worked widely on the social and political history of East Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The implication of the MacAndrew and Edgerton argument was that ‘time out’ was not the only possible learned manifestation of drunkenness. Subsequent scholarship has built on their arguments to move decisively away from the assumption of disinhibition while preserving the idea that in almost all human societies there is an expectation that drink defines moments in which behaviour is deemed to be of particular significance. This has inspired both functionalist analyses of the ‘purpose’ of drinking—in which it is argued that ‘the ceremonials of drinking construct an ideal world’ (Douglas, 1987: 8; see also Marshall, 1979: 3, 451–7)—and quite different studies which focus on the idea that drinking moments provide space for what Scott would call challenges to ‘transcripts of authority’ (Levine, 1983; Morgan, 1983; Scott, 1990: 121; Barrows, 1991). This article will suggest that the idea that drink creates particularly significant moments of behaviour can be more usefully set in the context of a theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977). In this approach drinking moments are laden, carrying an especial importance in the daily remaking of assumptions about behaviour and propriety which serve as ‘structuring structures’. The article will argue further—rather against Bourdieu—that this especial social weight extends also to the ways in which people *talk* about drinking. Through drinking, and through talking about drinking, people make and remake the assumptions about proper behaviour, and about power, on which social authority rests.

#### THE DECLINE OF GOOD COMPANY

The ideal of *ukwangala*, or ‘good company’, was central to Monica Wilson’s idea of how Nyakyusa society worked in the past, and was central to her ideas of how the values of that society were undermined by twentieth-century change. In her eyes the convivial company of age mates of one’s own sex was a central element in Nyakyusa ideas of pleasure and well-being (1963: 66–7, 1977: 85). Through such moments elder men in particular would acknowledge, while sharing food and millet beer, their mutual involvement in a community of interest through which they dominated society as a whole; and they would avert the ever-present danger posed by the jealous murmurings of the ‘breath of men’ by the unexpressed resentment of peers, and by witchcraft consequent on such resentment, all of which might bring ill health (1959: 66, 123, 1963: 55, 72, 78, 101, 106, 32, 62). Fear of the dangers of witchcraft and the breath of men permeated society, and underlay a kind of ritual balance between chiefs—who claimed a power of their own over what Feierman might call ‘social health’—and the innate power of elder men over the well-being of other individuals (Wilson, 1959: 2–3, 39, 1963: 127; Feierman, 1990: 94). The separation between different generations that was inherent in the idea of good company was bound up with the idea that elder men held particular power over one another’s well-being, and over the health of their male and female juniors (Wilson, 1957: 179, 1977: 87); and the superior status of old men was marked by their exclusive access to millet

beer, the lubricant of their social engagements with one another and the effective means of encouraging the ‘speaking out’ which dispelled dangerous resentments.

Wilson argued that this idealisation of ‘good company’ was undermined by changes in settlement patterns and in the Nyakyusa economy in the twentieth century (1963: 175–6). Young men acquired access to cash, particularly as migrant labourers in a regional colonial economy which took many of them a thousand miles south to the mines of the Rand, and they used that cash to buy cattle for bridewealth—thus evading the control over their reproductive powers which had been exercised by bridewealth-paying fathers. Even more subversively they bought beer which they drank with their fellows or even with their fathers (*ibid.*: 69, 176). The very nature of beer changed. Women, the beer makers of Nyakyusa society, started to make and sell maize beer rather than millet beer. And the cash income which women came to derive from selling beer gave them a new economic autonomy (1977: 131). A new imperative to individual accumulation undermined the commitment to generosity between age mates and, at the same time, population growth and the new economic importance of standing tree crops like tea and coffee ended a former pattern of generationally shifting settlement which had made practicable the strict separation of fathers and sons (1959: 221, 1977: 185). Wilson cited at length the opinion of a chief (when it was recorded is unclear) which firmly located changes in drinking as the root of a decline in the proper authority of elders:

Young men returning from work have less respect for seniors than formerly. What brings disrespect is beer; formerly the young did not drink beer, but now they come with their own money and buy and drink. Beer brings pride. A junior quarrels with an elder and seizes a spear. Beer used to belong to the older men. Yes, it belonged to men, there was none for sale, and juniors did not get any. [1977: 93]

Yet this vision of drinking change and its relation to a decline in ‘respect’ for elders rests on a particular understanding of Nyakyusa society in the nineteenth century. A reappraisal of the evidence on this suggests that Wilson’s portrayal of the past may overstate the hegemony exercised by elder men and, conversely, that her understanding of twentieth-century trajectories of change may overstate the decline in the authority of elders.

#### AUTHORITY AND DRINKING IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NYAKYUSA: A REAPPRAISAL

In Wilson’s analysis of nineteenth-century Nyakyusa society the age village was central in ensuring ‘good company’: her work repeatedly stressed the unique nature of this social institution (1963: 18, 157). At a certain age young men would move, as a group, out of their fathers’ homes and go to establish a new village under the rule of one of the sons

of the ruling chief. This establishment of new villages always involved a bifurcation—two sons of each chief would establish new villages (1959: 49–62, 1963: 19–31). The villages thus established were based not on kinship but on age, and thus was created a political and social community of men of similar age, a community which was linked with the political structure of chiefly rule (1959: 94).

Yet, central as the age village was to Wilson's analysis, there is a curiously unobserved quality to these institutions. Wilson (and others) noted in the 1930s, her most intensive period of fieldwork, that the actual composition of village settlements among the Nyakyusa did not reflect the ideal rules of settlement formation that she and her husband recorded from their informants (Wilson, 1959: 92, 1963: 35–7; McKenny, 1973). In her analysis this lack of fit between observed reality and supposed rules was the result of a process of breakdown that was already in train in the 1930s, but there is an alternative explanation: that age villages had never existed in their ideal form, and that descriptions of these phenomena were a retrospective creation of a model of age separation and authority which had never really achieved such a settled form.

Wilson herself noted—with evident puzzlement—that despite the presence of missionaries in the area from 1891, and despite the existence of a more or less effective colonial administration from 1894, no previous observer had mentioned the existence of the age villages (1963: 158). This omission is all the more striking since it does not reflect a simple lack of evidence; there were several brief published accounts of the area, and two lengthier ethnographic reports. One of these was the work of Theodor Meyer, a Moravian missionary resident in the area from 1891 to 1916 (Meyer, 1993); the other was prepared by Northcote, a British administrator, for the Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1931.<sup>1</sup> These sources make no mention of age villages.

In the late nineteenth-century accounts, chiefs appear as squabbling princelings vying for followers (Charsley, 1969: 70). Seeking always to attract young men to their settlements with the aim of building up their power to raid, they were in competition with household heads as much as with other chiefs, for they sought to undermine the efforts of married men to control the labour of younger men, who as sons or prospective sons-in-law would be expected to put in labour in the crucial male sphere of hoeing land for planting each year. Elder men sought to use their control over cattle and/or marriageable young women to maintain their claim on young men's labour (de Jonge, 1985). Behind these claims lay the authority derived from their presumed power to harm the

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<sup>1</sup> I have not been able to locate a full text of this but there are extracts in the Southern Highland Provincial Book and the Rungwe District Book, in the Tanzania National Archives (TNA). These extracts describe the succession of chiefs, but do not identify it with the wider process of generational succession.

well-being of their juniors, either through their own wrath or through their ability to stir or placate the anger of deceased elders (Meyer, 1993: 69, 212).

The sources dating from before the 1930s make clear the importance of drinking practice in creating this presumption of power: ‘Beer is drink for men and Gods,’ noted one missionary (Mackenzie, 1925: 128). Millet beer was constantly given to elder men and used by them in circumstances which suggested that the goodwill of elders was essential for well-being: ‘the important things [in rituals] are beer and meat’ (Meyer, 1993: 74). In marriage negotiations and in weddings, in funerals and in propitiatory offerings to recently deceased kin, and most of all in offerings made by young men who sought the forgiveness of elder men whose wrath they had incurred, drinking practice reproduced the idea that the unexpressed anger of elder men was a potent, dangerous force, and that millet beer would help elders to express their grievances, and so would dissipate that force (*ibid.*: 1993: 74, 77, 82). Beer was presented to elder men, was drunk by them and/or ‘blown’ out over those who sought forgiveness; and was ‘blown’ over the particular banana sucker which every man kept which was dedicated to the recently deceased members of the patriline (*ibid.*: 76). Wilson tried to categorise Nyakyusa notions of power over well-being, distinguishing witchcraft, the collective power of elder men, and the curse of a senior (1957: 3, 1959: 66; 1963: 91–4, 102). But Meyer’s account (and ambiguities in Wilson’s own schema) suggest that Nyakyusa ideas of this power were contested and in flux, and that all centred around the idea of ‘snakes’ in the intestine of the individual, a power which any individual might possess (Meyer, 1993: 86–104; see also Wilson, 1977: 69, 138).

Young men did ‘come out’ from their parental homes, reaching an age where they sought their fortune.<sup>2</sup> But this event was not directly associated with the ‘coming out’ of the son(s) of a chief (Charsley, 1969: 116). That too was a process full of conflict, between the chief and sons who might seek to supplant him (Fotheringham, 1891: 285). A young man anxious to acquire the wherewithal to marry might go to live in the following of a chief, just as he might go to serve a wealthy relative (Meyer, 1993: 134–5, 151), and an ambitious chief might seek to gather round himself a group of young men, whom he promised to reward with the spoils of raiding—and who took the cue to loot from the households of married men around them (*ibid.*: 132, 136; see also Wilson, 1959: 54; Charsley, 1969: 63).<sup>3</sup> The authority of these chiefs might be insubstantial—in 1877 one traveller was struck by the weakness of the chiefs (Elton, 1879: 331–2)—but the ambitions of such

<sup>2</sup> Neu Langenburg District Annual Report, 1919–20, 11: in TNA library; see also the extract from Northcote’s report, in the Southern Highlands Provincial Book, TNA.

<sup>3</sup> Violent dispossession features largely in popular memories of pre-colonial chiefship: see Ints Nya4c, 8; Nya36b, 3.

chiefs might spark off periods of intense raiding, plunging the area abruptly into a spate of localised violence and plunder (Charsley, 1969: 47, 116).<sup>4</sup> Chiefs feasted their followers, in defiance of elder men's claimed prerogative over alcoholic beverages. In even more striking defiance of the authority of elders, chiefs might subvert their claim to guarantee health by performing their own rituals, including, in one recorded instance, blowing beer over a group of young warriors (*ibid.*: 1969: 67). Drinking practice and discourse reflected, and participated in, the contested nature of authority.

The followings of chiefs offered refuge for dissatisfied women as well as young men. While Wilson believed that marriage among the Nyakyusa had become more unstable by the 1930s, Meyer's account suggested that adultery, and flight by wives, were not uncommon in the 1890s (1993: 123, 253–5). Young men who ran away with the wives of elder men might find a ready refuge in the village of a chief anxious for followers (just as they were to do in the twentieth century) (*ibid.*; 1993: 98),<sup>5</sup> and Meyer's account suggests that single runaway women might also come to join a chief's following, and might in doing so become sexually available to some of his young male following (*ibid.*: 140). In these ways, too, the claims to authority of chiefs and elder men were antagonistic and unformalised, and their antagonism made social space for the subordinate.

#### NYAKYUSA UNDER COLONIAL RULE

During the colonial period, access to new resources of power affected the relationship between chiefs, elder men and younger men, providing them with an authority which did not derive from—and was in some ways inimical to—assumptions about their power over well-being. Yet neither chiefs nor elders abandoned their claims over well-being and—especially from the 1920s, when British policies entrenched the role of the past as a discursive field for contest over the present—both chiefs and elders increasingly used the recasting of history, as much as the daily recreation of practice, to make and remake the assumptions of power on which their authority rested.

A lengthy process of engagement with missions began in 1891, offering access to material patronage—clothes, salt, tools and an alternative model of well-being—for those whom the missions favoured (Wright, 1972: 162).<sup>6</sup> From 1893 the presence of a German colonial state which disposed of considerable coercive resources, as well as

<sup>4</sup> So it was that Fotheringham, visiting the area in November 1889, was struck by the ubiquity of petty conflicts between chiefs (1891: 287–91), while another traveller, visiting a few months earlier, had thought this a particularly peaceful society: Kerr-Cross, (1890).

<sup>5</sup> For chiefs sheltering runaways in the 1920s, see Rungwe District Annual Report, 1924, 5, in TNA library.

<sup>6</sup> Ints Nya25b, 2; Nya19c, 3.

patronage, changed the nature of contests over authority even more dramatically. In the 1920s British officials believed that the German policy of recognising and ruling through a multitude of minor chiefs, to whom the state lent support in return for the efficient collection of tax and mobilisation of labour, had increased the effective authority of chiefs and made it possible for them to acquire a new degree of wealth at the expense of household heads, who were almost routinely subject to formalised theft of cattle through ‘trials’ and fines.<sup>7</sup> As Moore has argued of Kilimanjaro in the same period, colonial rule encouraged chiefs to serve as ‘accumulators’ rather than ‘redistributors’ (1986: 97, 104); it also meant that a chief’s ability to wield coercive power ultimately rested less on a following of young men than on relations with the colonial state.

British rule was effectively established in this area in 1917; by the mid-1920s the proliferation of minor chiefs had come to be seen as a major problem in the context of a Tanganyika-wide policy on indirect rule which sought the enlargement of political scale as well as the maintenance of tradition.<sup>8</sup> In 1926 the British accordingly created two ‘paramounts’ and effectively withdrew recognition from many smaller chiefs.<sup>9</sup> Several years of repeated disputes over boundaries, recognition and most of all over the power of the ‘paramounts’ led to a further reorganisation in 1935 which abolished paramountcies and created a new federation in which a small number of chiefs were recognised and allowed to have their own courts.<sup>10</sup> This, the time of the Wilson’s major fieldwork, was a crucial period. Wilson was later to argue that colonial rule strengthened the power of the chiefs as against commoner ‘headmen’ and household heads more generally (1977: 70). This had almost certainly been true up to 1930, but district administrators had already become acutely aware of it before the Wilsons arrived, and over the next two decades sought to reduce the power of chiefs.<sup>11</sup> This process culminated in 1949 with the establishment of a radical new system of local councils in which ‘headmen’ and commoners—specifically, ‘educated’ elders—held a majority.<sup>12</sup> Within these councils

<sup>7</sup> Neu Langenburg District Annual Report, 1919–20, 10, TNA library.

<sup>8</sup> Rungwe District Annual Report, 1923, 8–9, TNA library; Admin. Officer in Charge, Rungwe, to Chief Secretary, 6 June and 15 September 1925, TNA SMP 2724.

<sup>9</sup> Rungwe District Annual Report, 1926, 3–6, TNA library; Announcement, 27 January 1928, TNA 18/1.

<sup>10</sup> Memo, Huggins, District Officer (DO), Rungwe, 10 August 1934, and Provincial Commissioner (PC) Iringa to Chief Secretary, 28 March 1935, TNA 18/26/3; Rungwe District Annual Report, 1935, 1–4, TNA library.

<sup>11</sup> *Provincial Commissioners’ Reports on Native Administration, 1930* (Dar es Salaam, 1931), 30.

<sup>12</sup> District Commissioner (DC), Tukuyu, to PC, Southern Highlands Province, 15 January 1949; for the stress on the educated in the selection of the new councillors, see Mwakatumbula to DC, 24 February 1949; TNA 18/26/9. Incidentally, it should be noted that there is a confusion in English terminology: colonial officials sometimes referred to lesser chiefs (*balafyale*, in Nyakyusa terms) as ‘headmen’; Wilson uses this term solely for the non-chiefly figures called *mafumu* in Nyakyusa usage.



it soon became apparent that the category of ‘headmen’ (*mafumu*) was almost infinitely expandable and could include almost any male household head.<sup>13</sup> The councils moved rapidly to curtail the power of chiefs, particularly in the crucial area of their control over local courts.<sup>14</sup>

This series of reforms and new administrative schemes ensured that Nyakyusa chiefs, far from being secure in their influence, were constantly anxious at the challenges to their authority from rival chiefs and from elder men. In this situation they turned to history to bolster their claims. Their awareness of the potential importance of the Wilsons, as intermediaries with higher authority, was made explicit in the remark of one disgruntled would-be chief: ‘You all ask me about [clan histories], but you don’t give me a court!’<sup>15</sup> The elaboration of an ethnographic past in which chiefly power dovetailed with generational dominance, and in which the rituals of chiefly power were also those of generational succession, must be understood in this context: the idea of formalised age villages was an invention of chiefs and would-be chiefs who sought to legitimise their power by establishing it as part of the generational routine of succession. A similarly striking invention of the period, also taken up in Wilson’s analysis, was the idea that all the chiefs, the *balafyale*, were in some way related to one another and composed a distinct ethnic group which had come relatively recently to impose its dominion on the indigenes (Wilson, 1959: 1, 1963: 3). There is, quite simply, no hint of this in reports from the earlier period, in which people and the multiple competing lineages of chiefs were all represented as being of heterogeneous origins (Meyer, 1993: 28–30; see also Wilson, 1957: 16).<sup>16</sup> It would seem that the idea of a chiefly line, like the notion of ‘the Nyakyusa’ as a bounded ethnic group, was an invention of the twentieth century (Wright, 1972: 154).

The chiefs were not alone in recasting history. Throughout these years the relationship between elder men and chiefs shifted, from hostility to alliance, as all wrestled to assert authority over young men and women. Historical presentations of the seamless link between men’s authority and chief’s authority suited elder men too. By the later 1920s there was already substantial labour migration;<sup>17</sup> by the later 1930s it was one of the most striking features of Nyakyusa society, and

<sup>13</sup> Minute 41, meeting of 9–11 November 1950; Minute 52, meeting of 27–30 October 1952, TNA 157/L5/5/1.

<sup>14</sup> Minute 6, meeting of 23–25 April 1951, and Minute 57, meeting of 17 December 1952, TNA 157/L5/5/1.

<sup>15</sup> Book EIII, 31–32, Wilson Notebooks, African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town. This particular chief’s venture into history proved rewarding. In 1941 he was formally recognised by the British administration: PC Southern Highland Province to Chief Secretary, 22 May 1941, TNA 77/26/25.

<sup>16</sup> The Rungwe District Book and the Southern Highlands Provincial Book contain lengthy sections on ‘tribal history’, which identify multiple lineages of chiefs; and multiple antecedents for the commoner populace.

<sup>17</sup> Three thousand men a year were going to work in the goldfields of Lupa, a little to the north, in the late 1920s: ‘Labour’, Rungwe District Book, TNA library.

continued to be so right through the 1950s, when the South African mining industry established a recruitment office in Tukuyu, the administrative centre of Nyakyusa.<sup>18</sup> The flow of cash wages into the hands of young men diminished the patronage power of elder men and of chiefs. Young men could buy their own cattle and marry now.<sup>19</sup> Chiefs and household heads tussled over the use of state resources, particularly courts, to control the consequences of this new-found wealth. The cost of a bride rose rapidly as elder men tried to extract wealth from younger migrant labourers (Wilson, 1977: 149, 188), and courts could punish young men for seeking to evade these rising costs by imposing fines for adultery or for running away with a girl.<sup>20</sup> The Nyakyusa regarded courts as a chief's key source of authority.<sup>21</sup> British administrators, stunned by the popularity of courts, noted that the vast majority of cases concerned adultery, desertion or elopement (Hall, 1943).<sup>22</sup>

Until 1949 chiefs still dominated the courts. Elder men turned to the chiefs for help in policing a bridewealth system which served to limit the effects of young men's cash earnings, and chiefs were able to use considerable coercion in this role when they chose. Following one particularly flagrant assault on a woman accused of desertion, a witness remarked that 'It is not unusual to see women beaten in native courts.'<sup>23</sup> But elder men frequently complained that chiefs instead used the courts to try and accumulate on their own account, taking runaway women into their own retinue rather than upholding the claims of household heads.<sup>24</sup> Colonial rule provided new resources for the control of younger men and women; but control over these resources was contested.

Economic change offered household heads opportunities as well as challenges. From the later 1920s foodstuffs could be sold for cash, and from the 1930s a small number of African men were growing coffee or tea for the market.<sup>25</sup> Married men and women became involved in a

<sup>18</sup> Int Nya4c, 3–5. In 1940, more than 8,000 men each year were going to work as migrant labourers: Rungwe District Annual Report, 1940, 9, Rhodes House Mss Afr s 741 (2).

<sup>19</sup> Int Nya4c, 5.

<sup>20</sup> DO Rungwe to Headman, Kiwira, 18 September 1933, TNA 18/27/2; Federation Council minutes of 8–9 May 1935, TNA 18/26/3.

<sup>21</sup> DO Tukuyu to PC Iringa, 9 October 1930, and Acting DO Rungwe to PC Iringa, 29 December 1930, TNA 18/1; Korosso to DO Rungwe, 8 January 1930, TNA 18/22; Tour report, Northcote, February 1931, TNA 77/1/32; Wilson Notebook EIII, 97, African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town.

<sup>22</sup> Rungwe District Annual Report, 1926, TNA library; PC Southern Highland Province to Chief Secretary, 16 August 1941, TNA 18/26/9; DC Tukuyu to PC Southern Highlands Province, 8 August 1944, TNA 18/27/1. In 1951, it was noted that well over half the court cases recorded were 'matrimonial/divorce': see lists in TNA SMP 19016, Vol. III.

<sup>23</sup> Statement of Prosecution Witness 5, attached DC Tukuyu to PC Southern Highlands Province, 5 May 1944, TNA 77/26/25.

<sup>24</sup> Rungwe District Annual Report, 1927, 4, TNA library.

<sup>25</sup> 'Native foodstuffs' and 'Rice', Rungwe District Book, TNA library; Wilson Notebook EXIII, 6, African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town.

chronic dispute over this income. Wilson observed that women took some of the cash, but an official noted in the 1930s that ‘economic crops are mainly the property of married and settled men’.<sup>26</sup> Household heads also earned money in less predictable ways, which illustrated the ability of some to control the economic enterprise of their wives. By the early 1930s beer had already come to be an item of commerce, and in 1941 more than 1,700 male taxpayers (out of a total of 31,000) derived their tax money from the selling of beer or malted grain made by their wives.<sup>27</sup>

In dealings with new, colonial, forms of power certain of the former practices which had made authority came to be inappropriate. Drinking beer was not deemed suitable for the world of desks and chairs and written records which came into existence around the courts, so there was an end to the drinking which would once have ensured that all were reconciled to the settlement of a case. Missions—Lutheran and Moravian—provided their adherents with at least some of the skills of reading and writing which officials (and some chiefs) increasingly sought when choosing their subalterns.<sup>28</sup> In return these Churches expected their followers to desist from involvement in public non-Christian rituals, and from 1927 they discouraged the drinking of beer (Mackenzie, 1925: 31).<sup>29</sup> In offering new routes to health—which were taken up with apparent enthusiasm by the populace—the petty clinics and hospitals of the colonial medical service also sought to discourage reliance on former rituals of well-being.<sup>30</sup>

In consequence, it is evident that public practice of certain rituals declined and that there was a diminution of the formerly prominent role of beer in events which recreated assumptions about the power of elders over health. There is clear evidence of changing attitudes to drink and authority in the debate over control of beer selling. For years, chiefs in Nyakyusa resisted the introduction of ‘permits’ for the sale of millet beer, apparently because they feared that such official recognition would change the marginal and ambiguous status of beer selling, establishing the propriety of its sale to, and consumption by, young men and women.<sup>31</sup> Immediately after the establishment of the new councils

<sup>26</sup> ‘Labour’, Rungwe District Book, TNA library. See also Ints Nya 4b, Nya 9a, Nya 18b.

<sup>27</sup> Rungwe District Annual Report, 1941, Rhodes House Mss Afr s 741 (3).

<sup>28</sup> For the preference for the educated, see Int Nya39a, 2; see also Nya11a. The missions dominated education up to the 1950s: in 1925, there were 14,000 pupils in mission schools of various kinds in the district, and eighty-eight in the government school in Tukuyu. Rungwe District Annual Report, 1925, 21, TNA library.

<sup>29</sup> Ints Nya14a, 5; Nya31b, 3. Wright (1971: 161) shows how this prohibition began in the 1920s, apparently as a result of Presbyterian influence, and as the result of a decision by African Christians, not missionary edict.

<sup>30</sup> In 1933, 33,000 patients attended hospitals or clinics in the district: ‘Medical’, Rungwe District Book, TNA library; by 1941 there were 121,000 attendances from a population of 153,000: Rungwe District Annual Report, 1941, 11, Rhodes House Mss Afr s 741 (3).

<sup>31</sup> Minute 8, meeting of 25–27 September 1944, TNA 18/26/9; see also Int Nya14b, 4 for comments on concern over permitting beer sale.

in 1949 the men who dominated them—all selected on grounds of education—established a permit system.<sup>32</sup> They were willing to recognise and formalise the sale of this symbolic resource of male power as part of the development of a system of local government which offered them wages and control over the patronage resources of the state. The direct consequence of their decision was the rapid spread of ‘clubs’ holding permits.<sup>33</sup> These had hitherto been confined to Tukuyu and Kyela, the two small towns of the area. From the early 1950s they became a common feature of rural life, and much beer consumption moved from a domestic setting into these new clubs.

But even as household heads took up—and fought over—these new sources of power, many of them still sought to reproduce the idea that they possessed a special power over the well-being of others. And the ways they talked about—and drank—beer still played an important part in this. Public rituals involving the blowing of beer may have declined, but in the negotiations over marriage, at funerals, and in events intended to seek the goodwill of the deceased or the forgiveness of living elders, beer still occupied a central position.<sup>34</sup> And as the comment recorded by Wilson showed, evocations of a former ideal of drinking stressed that, properly, elder men alone should have access to beer.

#### STATE AND ECONOMY SINCE 1961

Wilson identified the Marriage Act of 1971 as a defining moment of the post-colonial experience. Giving women new legal rights in marriage and divorce, for Wilson the Act was emblematic of the changes in relations of authority which resulted from the new ability of traditionally subordinate groups to access the power of the state in social conflicts (Wilson, 1977). This new access to power compounded the effects of wage employment and the cash market in beer and other items, further undermining the power of elders. Using the Marriage Act as the end of her narrative, Wilson expressed the belief that it confirmed—and made irrevocable—the overall direction of a pattern of ‘zigzag change’.

The post-colonial experience looks rather different when viewed from the end of 2001. The brief efflorescence of the Tanzanian state in the 1960s and 1970s did indeed create a new public rhetoric of authority and rights, abolishing chiefs and introducing an entirely new system of courts (Moore, 1986: 157–61). It also vastly expanded wage employment and the range of state-sponsored projects which bestowed wealth particularly on the literate and those who possessed the kind of formal education acquired through mission and state schools. Through state-controlled crop marketing bodies the educated and employed were

<sup>32</sup> Minute 8 of first meeting, n.d.; Minute 32 (vi), meeting of 22–24 October 1952; Minute 69, meeting of 5–9 October 1953, TNA 157/L5/5/1.

<sup>33</sup> Ints Nya36a, 4; Nya4a, 3; Nya40a, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson Notebook EIII, 103–5; 135; African Studies Centre, University of Cape Town.

effectively subsidised by cultivators; education and employment appeared as the key to wealth. Yet even at its height the state became entwined with existing forms of authority at the local level, as Moore has shown for Kilimanjaro. Older married men and household heads dominated the system of ten-house cells and party organisation, and most cases under the Marriage Act went to informal tribunals, not to the courts (*ibid.*: 1986: 147–8, 161, 165, 213). And in the period of ‘political and economic decay’ from the 1980s (Barkan, 1994: 21–35) the ability of individuals to access the wealth or the coercive power of the state declined. Formal wage employment opportunities had already begun to decline in the 1960s, with the effective end of labour migrancy to the south. By the 1990s local labour opportunities focused around cross-border smuggling, principally of sugar, and a halting liberalisation of the food-grain trade and of the marketing of coffee and cocoa (a lowland crop established in the 1960s) had created new, if limited, opportunities for cultivators. The most effective strategy for accumulation—or for survival—was to combine access to land and labour with some involvement in petty trade or a craft.

Control over land has therefore been an important source of authority for elder married men (as Gulliver, 1958: 21–5, noted in the late 1950s), but they struggle to control the time of unmarried sons and the sexual activity of their daughters. They struggle too to stop young men and boys from helping themselves to crops, or from practising even more open forms of theft. There is a clear sense of generational conflict; and in this conflict elder men and the local officials of the state are increasingly in alliance, rather than competition, each seeking the other’s support. In trying to collect ‘development tax’, in combating theft and in occasional attempts to mobilise communal involvement or labour in ‘development’ schemes, the local representatives of the state turn to elder married men. Over a period of several months I observed the difficulties of a very senior local official who had bought a piece of land but was unable to control the labourers hired to work it, or to stop constant theft of crops. Eventually the official had to enlist the support of the most prominent neighbouring homestead head. In theory the official possessed control over the local coercive resources of the state—but could not rely on them to enforce property rights or labour contracts. Such is the ‘retraditionalisation’ of the state, in its most local form (Chabal and Daloz, 1999).

#### DRINKING AND AUTHORITY IN THE 1990s

As in the pre-colonial period, the authority of elder men rests ultimately on assumptions about their power over well-being. That such assumptions remain widespread is apparent. When one young man was killed in an accident in Tukuyu in 1997 local discussion immediately identified his defiant attitude to his father—culminating in a recent public quarrel—as the cause of his death. My research assistant readily explained a very serious illness which had befallen him as a result of the resentment of an uncle; he had recovered only when

the uncle was induced to vent the resentment publicly. While grand public ritual events, in which chiefs played a role, have largely disappeared—their demise assured by the hostility of the Christian denominations to which most of the populace belong—there are constant smaller events which evoke and remake assumptions about the power of elder men, and the danger posed by their unexpressed resentment. The notion of spitting out or venting anger is commonly mentioned, and the very terminology of Christian worship maintains this notion.<sup>35</sup>

The giving and consumption of alcoholic beverages continues to play an important part in recreating these assumptions. Since the introduction of the rural clubs in the 1950s the bulk of village drinking has taken place in them. In the 1960s, indeed, local officials sought to insist that all sales of drink should be confined to the clubs.<sup>36</sup> But drink sales are not governed solely by access to cash. Most drinkers are men, and they drink in groups which share the cost of a quantity of beer, which is consumed without any strict regard for the amount each member contributed. Drinking groups are self-selecting, running along lines of friendship and shared appreciation of status. Beneath a commercial surface, such drinking reproduces ideas about generosity and status, and about who may drink with whom. There is contest, of course, for that is the nature of drinking events. Sometimes there are more or less heated arguments about who may drink in which group, or accusations about the failure of some members of a group to contribute. But the rules of drinking are not set simply by ability to pay.

The ambiguity about the degree to which beer is ‘commoditised’ in these events is apparent from the difficulty women sellers frequently encounter in extracting payment—a difficulty which makes beer selling a much less reliable source of income in this area than has been argued of neighbouring Iringa (Green, 1999). Credit sale is common, and delayed or refused payment leaves the status of many drinking events hanging uneasily between giving and sale. Courts and local officials have been unwilling to get involved in enforcing the commercial nature of drinking.<sup>37</sup>

There are other, explicitly non-commercial, drinking events which evoke elder authority. Beer has apparently disappeared from some events but continues to feature in others in a pattern which partly reflects the degree to which Christian Churches have captured the physical space of performance. Many older men and women will explain that in the past a bride would always be taken to the groom with beer, to ensure the goodwill of all the families involved.<sup>38</sup> Where a

<sup>35</sup> See Int Nya12b, 3; also Int Nya19c, 5, which explicitly link the Nyakyusa notion of *kwiikemesya* with Christian confessional practice; the same point is made in Wright, (1971: 91).

<sup>36</sup> Int Nya10b, 4; Katibu wa TANU wa Wilaya—all Katibu tarafa and Kata, 16 January 1976, Rungwe District file L3/2.

<sup>37</sup> Ints Nya18b, 4; Nya19a, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Int Nya20a, 3; Nya39b, 1; Nya17a, 3.

church is the central place for a wedding, this no longer occurs. But for those who choose to keep all or most of the wedding events away from church, the pattern of beer giving, and its association with ensuring the goodwill of the living and the dead, remain explicit.

If your daughter is getting married, you prepare beer and pour some for the ancestors. You prepare beer and food and people come . . . If they [unclear whether this means ancestors or neighbours] do not drink they cause problems . . . Maybe the children will get sick.<sup>39</sup>

Mourning, which is very much a domestic affair, still requires beer. Beer makers bring beer to sell, but then it is given and shared.<sup>40</sup> Household heads still perform domestic rituals of well-being in which beer is poured; reconciliation between men who have quarrelled still requires beer.<sup>41</sup> In seeking forgiveness from a senior, the gift of beer is of fundamental importance.

You have been cheeky to me: can you be cheeky to me? At once you start to suffer, for you are cursed. When you go to your father to repent, you must offer something. When you have given him some money, he calls people . . . When he has made beer he calls people who can help him to remove the curse<sup>42</sup>.

There is an element of uncertainty over whether this ability to harm extends to all younger people, or only to kin. Here there is a hint of a narrowing of the range of elders' power since the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> And these events are just as contested as are daily drinking: some young men try to avoid paying bride price at all; some refuse to seek forgiveness; many will insist that there should be no beer at their wedding, for their Christianity forbids it.<sup>44</sup> But others argue for these events, and some go through them, and in remembering the past people argue the present. 'Without beer people could not talk properly,' explained one man during mourning. In his view the drinking had ensured social harmony and well-being, but he added, 'The elders were separated. They would not drink with young people carelessly.'<sup>45</sup> Argument and practice recreate the idea of elder authority over well-being, making it inhere in everyday existence.

Mostly it is maize beer which is consumed at all these events, in clubs and elsewhere. Bottled beer intrudes rather less into domestic rituals; nor is it a common feature of village club drinking. For many years bottled beer was only ever available in a few bars in the towns of

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<sup>39</sup> Int Nya19c, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Int Nya4b, 4; Nya27a, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Int Nya20a, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Int Nya10b, 3–4.

<sup>43</sup> Int Nya19c, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Int Nya34a, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Int Nya4b, 4.

Tukuyu and Kyela (and often not even then). Now that Tanzania's breweries have been revived, bottled beer is always available in town, and occasionally it makes its way into rural clubs. But this is an expensive way to drink—about six times the price of maize beer. And it is consumed in rather different ways. Bottled beer tends to be bought by individuals for their own consumption rather than for sharing with a group. Sometimes bottled beer may feature in marriage payments, for example, but it is not common, and in 1997 a survey of rural drinking among the Nyakyusa showed that bottled beer accounted for less than 0.5 per cent of alcohol consumption.<sup>46</sup>

Drinking events, then, may still reproduce a notion of elders' authority. And even when they are not drinking, the way in which elder men in particular talk about drinking is important. There has been a subtle recasting here, too. Some retrospective accounts of drinking make much of the moderation of elders' drinking, a stress on sobriety which accords well with post-colonial Tanzania's emphasis on hard work and responsibility.<sup>47</sup> But the key point is that modern drinking is dangerous: 'Nowadays this alcohol has brought about diseases.'<sup>48</sup> In a healthier past, elders had exclusive access to beer. 'They are drunkards, our young people; it wasn't that way with our parents.' 'Today's beer is different . . . We began when we were adults, but these ones, they are careless by nature.'<sup>49</sup> Youthful disobedience—and ill health—are the consequence of changes in drinking behaviour: 'My children do not like digging, and instead go to drink beer. This makes people not care about dying, or working like we did, because of beer.'<sup>50</sup> The idea of drinking change recorded by Wilson is still common: discourses on the dangers of modern drinking serve, in a continuing debate over well-being, as an explicit assertion of the linkage between respect for elders and the well-being of society and individuals.

#### CONCLUSION

Among the Nyakyusa drinking has changed enormously in the last century. It now takes place very largely in commercial settings, in which women and young men have, in theory, considerable access to alcohol. But Wilson's argument that a decline in the authority of 'men and elders' was inextricably associated with drinking change is problematic. Pre-colonial authority and drinking patterns were more contested than she argued; and at the end of the twentieth century—as people in Tanzania struggle to adjust to the declining wealth and abilities of the state—an assumption of a gendered, generational, power over well-being, recognisably similar to that manifested by late nineteenth-

<sup>46</sup> Results summarised on the web site at <http://www.dur.ac.uk/History/projects.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Ints Nya12b, 5; Nya17b, 4; Nya20a, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Int Nya14b, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ints Nya19b, 4; Nya8c, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Int Nya3b, 6.



century drinking practice, is being made and remade in daily life, partly through drinking practice but even more through the creation of a discursive realm in which beer still properly does belong to elder men. Nobody champions the propriety of youthful drinking of maize or millet beer, and there are many who assert that ‘Long ago, old men would drink. Young people never used to drink.’<sup>51</sup> In doing so, they assert also a relationship between proper drinking, the authority of elders and well-being, and they denounce a modernity which has called that relationship into question yet has failed to offer any effective alternative route to well-being:

... life is very hard and complex now. ... The beer in the past did not cause any harm because education was very little. It was too little to lure people to drunkenness. It was little. Now they mix many drugs into the beer. That’s why people get so drunk, not like in the past. They put many intoxicating things in the beer. That is why many people are getting infected with very many diseases, many infectious diseases which weren’t around in the past ... Nowadays there is a lot of TB and syphilis. Infectious diseases are common because people are overcrowded. They are so crowded such that we no longer have protections and treatments. We do not have the protective medicines, there are just no hospitals. When people are taken you have to pay for the medicine. So those who are poor, when they go there, they come back untreated. That is why death is so common now. ... We are worried about our lives because we have nothing to protect us.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Int Nya5a, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Int Nya34a, 1.

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#### ABSTRACT

The Nyakyusa were the subject of a classic series of ethnographies. This article suggests that these works took insufficient account of struggles over authority in the colonial period. Consequently they overstated the formalisation of chiefly power and understated the complex relationship between generational tensions and political authority in the pre-colonial period. Following discursive and practical changes in the use of alcohol, the article identifies a shift in the nature of power among the Nyakyusa over the twentieth century and develops the idea that drinking talk, and drinking practice, are central fields for the creation and recreation of the assumptions of power which underpin authority.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Les Nyakyusa ont fait l'objet d'une série classique d'ethnographies. Cet article suggère que ces études n'ont pas tenu suffisamment compte des luttes de pouvoir au cours de la période coloniale. Elles ont par conséquent surestimé la formalisation du pouvoir des chefs et minimisé la relation complexe entre tensions générationnelles et autorité politique au cours de la période précoloniale. A la suite d'une évolution discursive et pratique de la consommation d'alcool, l'article dénote un changement dans la nature du pouvoir chez les Nyakyusa au cours du vingtième siècle et développe l'idée selon laquelle la discussion accompagnée d'une consommation d'alcool et la pratique de la consommation d'alcool sont des domaines fondamentaux de création et recreation des prises du pouvoir qui étayent l'autorité.